

## **Tutu Noir**

**By Courtenay Stallings**

Jack Halperin couldn't even remember her face. She had been taken from him years ago—not taken in the “six-feet-in-the-ground” sort of way—no, she had disappeared completely. She had been the first woman he had ever loved. Heck, she was the only woman he had ever loved. Will ever love? His mind clouded and his brow furrowed as he thought about it. Jacqueline. That was her name. Although, she made him call her Jacques, after the postmodern philosopher Derrida). She got a kick out of his hatred for all things Derrida and postmodernism. Jacques always cited that New York Times article, in which the reporter who flew all the way to Bangladesh to interview Spivak, the critical theorist who translated Derrida, only to have Spivak reply, “I just came here for the mangoes.” The response became an inside joke and their reply to all things absurd. He chuckled at the thought of her quick wit and gregarious laugh. He missed her, but he couldn't remember her face. She never liked to be photographed, so he had retained no memento of her.

On this particular day, Jack was doing his Kinhin—his walking Buddhist meditation—around his North Hollywood neighborhood. In a trance, he retraced the steps where he last walked with Jacques, where he last saw her. Their last moments were spent ambling beside a graffiti lined wall along a back alley behind the old Federal building. While they were chatting, she saw a shadowy figure at the end of the alley. Jack jerked her hand, planning to turn around and skirt the dangerous unknown form, but Jacques pulled away from him and ran toward the shadow. Then, she was gone. Just like that. Poof. He imagined that she had mob connections, since she was always so secretive about her family and her former life. Jack retraced the steps along the alleyway, trying to locate some clue as to where and with whom she had gone.

After tracing the slow roll of his feet upon the gum-tainted cement sidewalk, Jack looked up to the location where the shadowy figure had beckoned. Instead of a shadow, he spotted a food stand on the corner. A small, slight Hispanic woman was manning the stand, selling those old-fashioned brightly colored lollipops. When he approached, she handed him a lollipop.

“No, thank you,” Jake replied.

“But no, you don't understand. It is a gift. It's free. Here, take it.” She thrust the large, multi-colored lollipop in his hand. Perturbed but amused, he took the lollipop and proceeded around the corner of the alley. He dabbled his tongue upon the candy flesh and recoiled. It did not taste like what he expected. It tasted like beer—not just any beer, but Pabst Blue Ribbon beer—the cheap beer all the hipsters drink. He shuddered. Jake felt a tap on his shoulder. “Sir, I'm going to have to ask you to turn around.” Lollipop in hand, Jake slowly turned toward the voice. It was a policeman.

“Sir, I'm going to have to ask you to walk this line. You appear to be publicly intoxicated,” the Cop said.

Jake was mystified. He hadn't had anything to drink. It was ten in the morning for Christ's sake. Jake dumbly walked the line and looked up at the officer after he had carefully traced his steps. The officer pulled out a tube-like device and asked Jake to blow into it. "That's what I thought," the Cop replied, "You're over the limit." The officer reached into his breast pocket for his paperwork. While the officer was distracted, the small Hispanic woman approached Jake and handed him a brick. "Here," she whispered, "Throw this at the wall. Trust me. This is your way out." Dumbfounded, Jake didn't know what to do, but he blindly followed her direction, and, against better judgment, flung the red brick at the stucco wall of the alley. A large, round opening formed on the wall. It seemed to vibrate. Jake stuck his finger inside and felt his finger quiver. The woman pushed him from behind and he fell into the quivering hole.

Once inside, he glimpsed a shadowy figure at the end of a dark hallway. The hole that was open to the street closed up behind him. He made his way forward to the shadow. In front of him sat a large elephant in a purple tutu with a pink rhinestone purse. The elephant grinned and proceeded to sashay toward him while her round, gray rolls spilled over the crinoline of the tutu.

"What's that old line from that CCR song—'Memory's an elephant, playing in the band'—at least that's how I remember it," the elephant told him knowingly. Jake was about to argue with the elephant regarding the lyrics, but then realized how absurd the whole situation was. Jake was sure there was something more than cheap beer laced on that lollipop. He rubbed his eyes and looked at the elephant again. The voice was so familiar. The elephant sounded exactly like ... Jacques. "Jacqueline," he said, using her real name, "Is that you?"

The elephant grinned and carefully laid down the pink rhinestone purse, straightened out her purple tutu, and twirled. "Of course, it's me!" she exclaimed as she twirled about the room and around Jake. "You don't remember my face, but I never forget a face," the elephant laughed. Jake was sure he had lost it. He hadn't been this messed up since his older brother fed him that special brownie in high school. "I'm not sure what to believe," Jake said. "Forget it, Jake, it's tutu town. You're one of us now." The elephant laughed. Jake looked down at his feet, which had turned into large, crusty cushion pads. His skin was now a toughened gray. In dismay, he reached for Jacques and said, "But I just came here for the mangoes!" The elephant laughed. Jake shed a tear. Then they both twirled. And twirled. And twirled. And twirled.